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## Language, Literature and the Proverbial Tones of Cultural History in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*

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### Abstract

*The use of proverbial language in Ola Rotimi's Kurunmi climaxes on the historical events of 19th-century Yorubaland as a historical drama. This narrative powerfully depicts resistance, tradition, and leadership themes through its eponymous character and other key characters in the story. This paper examines Rotimi's use of proverbial tones to deepen the drama's historical texture while reinforcing Yoruba oral traditions in postcolonial literary discourse. This study employs the descriptive research design and content analysis to contextualise issues bordering on language, literature, and the essence of proverbial tones as artistic splendour. Rotimi's use of proverbs is a stylistic embellishment that promotes the complex interplay between tradition and modernity. By incorporating indigenous philosophies that shape character dynamics like the experiences of Kurunmi, Ola Rotimi illustrates the Yoruba traditional belief system alongside the influences of foreign ideologies. Additionally, his use of proverbs reflects universal societal norms, ethical codes, and communal wisdom that have been transmitted through generations. The study concludes that Ola Rotimi's use of proverbial tones in Kurunmi enriches the play's dramatic quality and reasserts the role of language and literature in preserving cultural history. It recommends further exploration of African dramatic texts as repositories of indigenous knowledge systems and tools for cultural revitalisation.*

**Key words:** Language, Literature, Proverb, Tone, and Cultural History

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### Introduction

Language transcends its function as a mere instrument of communication; it serves as a fundamental vessel for identity, memory, and the continuity of culture. In African literature, especially within the dramatic tradition, language serves as a profound marker of indigenous knowledge systems and collective consciousness that “expresses the ideas, values, and attitudes of its members” (Amberg and Vause 3). The intricate interplay between language, literature, and the manifestations of Yoruba cultural history occupies a pivotal position in the realm of postcolonial African theatre. Within this scholarly framework, Nigerian playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Sam Ukala, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima,

and many others engage in a concerted effort to reclaim indigenous voices and assert cultural authenticity, proactively responding to the historical erasure and pervasive influence of Western hegemony. This reclamation process not only endeavours to preserve and celebrate the multifaceted richness of Yoruba heritage but also “an attempt to locate the cultural identity of the African people” (Yerima 15). A prominent figure in this discourse is Ola Rotimi, whose oeuvre embodies a profound commitment to indigenous histories, oral traditions, and performative aesthetics, thus contributing significantly to the discourse on cultural identity and representation in contemporary African theatre.





Ola Rotimi's canvas was the historical event from 19th-century Yoruba history in which war broke out between the Ijaye and Ibadan kingdoms over the controversial practice of the Abobaku (the one who accompanies the King to the afterlife) traditional custom. While the narrative itself is based on recorded history, Rotimi's use of literature and language, being inflected with proverbs, idioms, chants, and culturally rooted metaphors, tremendously enriches the play with layers of meanings beyond the textual composition. Ola Rotimi's creative direction is captured through Olu Obafemi's approach, which

is not to dwell, in any exclusivity manner, on the subject of language and literature and their roles in shaping Nigeria's political consciousness. What I do is to present a textual study of a very prefatory kind of Nigerian writers and their deployment of literature and the instrumentality of language to hone and sharpen the political consciousness of Nigerians. (Obafemi 21)

Language use in *Kurunmi* is performative and symbolic; it becomes a repository of cultural memory and an active path to shaping the political consciousness of Nigerians. In analysing *Kurunmi*, it is crucial to understand how Rotimi uses language not simply as a medium for character interaction but as a means of cultural historiography. His strategic use of indigenous expressions, even when translated into English, demonstrates a commitment to cultural authenticity and resistance to linguistic colonisation.

Ola Rotimi's dramatisation of the clash between tradition and modernity in the literary conception of *Kurunmi*

stands out as a compelling example of how language, particularly in its proverbial and rhetorical richness, serves to reconstruct and reimagine the cultural history of a people. Interestingly, the "cultural background of a people can easily be determined through their proverbs. It helps explain a people's historical development, perspectives about life, and attitude" (Jegede and Osoba 92). The deployment of Yoruba proverbial wisdom in the play is particularly striking. Proverbs in African oral tradition are not only linguistic ornaments but vehicles of philosophical depth, historical consciousness, and social values. Rotimi blends English with Yoruba-inflected syntax and expressions, creating a hybridised linguistic form that affirms the legitimacy of African cultural narratives. This paper, therefore, explores how Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* engages language and literature as instruments of cultural history, with a specific focus on its proverbial tones.

### **Conceptualising Language, Literature, Proverb, Tone, and Cultural History. Language**

Language operates as a dynamic system of communication that incorporates spoken, written, and symbolic modalities to convey meaning, express identity, and facilitate human interaction. It serves as a medium for the exchange of ideas while simultaneously functioning as a cultural artefact that mirrors a given community's worldview, values, and historical experiences. "A discussion of the development of contemporary dramatic literature must take us back. Extant/artistic elements draw from a rich cultural heritage, handed down from pre-literate times, through the oral medium" (Obafemi 42).

Through its evolution and adaptation, language not only reflects societal changes but also shapes social





relationships and cultural practices, underscoring its integral role in the formation of collective identities. According to Amberg and Vause, language is notably “a means of communication, and communication almost always takes place within some sort of social context. This is why effective communication requires an understanding and recognition of the connections between a language and the people who use it” (2). In literary and cultural studies, language transcends its communicative role to become a powerful tool of expression, resistance, and representation. It is through language that stories are told, histories are preserved, and social realities are constructed or challenged. Particularly in postcolonial contexts, language plays a dual role: it can both assert indigenous identity and bear the traces of colonial influence. Thus, to conceptualise language is to recognise it as a living, evolving force that both mirrors and moulds the cultural and ideological fabrics of society.

### Literature

Literature is a body of written or spoken works that explore human experience, emotions, and ideas through creative expressions. It encompasses a wide range of genres, including fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction, and serves as both a reflection of society and a means of shaping cultural narratives. Literature is not merely a form of entertainment; it is a powerful tool for communicating complex themes, preserving histories, and critiquing social structures. According to McFadden 1978 cited in Meyer, “literature is a canon which consists of those works in language by which a community defines itself through the course of its history” (3). It often engages with the human condition,

grappling with issues like identity, morality, love, conflict, and power. Through the use of language, symbolism, and narrative techniques, literature opens up spaces for imagination and dialogue, allowing individuals and communities to engage with different perspectives. Interestingly, dramatic “literature in Nigeria could be assessed vis-à-vis the ideology or non-ideology informing the dramatist’ vision” (Obafemi 48). In both oral and written traditions, literature becomes a repository of cultural memory, providing insights into the values, struggles, and beliefs of a people. It also functions as a site for innovation and experimentation, constantly evolving in response to the social, political, and intellectual climates of its time. Ultimately, literature is an enduring reflection of the diverse ways in which humans make sense of the world.

### Proverbs

Proverbs are concise, metaphorical expressions that encapsulate collective wisdom, cultural values, and life lessons acquired over generations. Found in virtually every human society, proverbs serve as tools for communication, social regulation, and identity formation. Olofinsao also agrees by stating that proverbs “are wise sayings of the Yoruba in which many of their ideas of religion, morality and courtesy are woven. They are the poetry and moral science of the Yoruba nation” (548), which are “communication tools within culturally defined contexts, such that a function-based, rather than a structure-based, approach must be taken to properly understand their role in the dramas” (Jegade and Osoba 93).

In culture, proverbs function as mirrors of societal beliefs and behavioural norms. They provide insights into how communities



understand themes such as justice, leadership, gender roles, family dynamics, and spirituality. In culture, proverbs function as mirrors of societal beliefs and behavioural norms utilised in the “process of communication’ speakers of Yoruba usually make use of proverbs to portray their views logically, thereby enriching and beautifying the content of their speech” (Amasa and AbdulRauph 4). They provide insight into how communities understand themes such as justice, leadership, gender roles, family dynamics, and spirituality. Overall, proverbs are not only linguistic artefacts but dynamic cultural instruments.

### **Tone**

Tone refers to the attitude, emotion, or mood conveyed by a speaker or writer through language. It is shaped by word choice, sentence structure, rhythm, and emphasis, which significantly affects how messages are interpreted. In both spoken and written communication, tone helps express feelings such as respect, anger, sarcasm, or affection, guiding the listener or reader to understand not just what is said, but how it is meant. According to the Stone Writing Center at Del Mar College, tone is “the expression of the author's attitude, like the tone of voice in a character, the tone of a story may communicate amusement, anger, affection, sorrow, or contempt”. Culturally, tone carries important social meanings and can reflect communal values, norms, and power dynamics. In many African societies, for example, tone is crucial in greeting customs, storytelling, and conflict resolution. Interestingly, tone, as a linguistic term, refers to “a phonological category that distinguishes two words or utterances, and is thus a term only relevant for languages in which tone plays some sort of linguistic role” (Yip 2). A respectful or

humble tone may signal deference to elders or authority figures, while a firm or assertive tone might be used to establish boundaries or express leadership. Misinterpreting tone across cultures can lead to misunderstanding or offence, as different societies attach different meanings to vocal inflexions and emotional cues.

### **Cultural History**

Culture is the sphere where the reproduction of life itself is embellished with a sense of entitlement. According to Dominick 2009 cited by Obafemi, culture is a complex concept that refers to the common values, beliefs, social practices, rules, and assumptions that bind a group of people together” (124). History, on the other hand, is the systematic study of a given identity and the interpretation of past events around such identity, human actions, and societal developments from ancient times. In capturing the cultural history of Yorubaland, researchers must validate the chronological record of cultural practices with analyses of why and how those events happened. According to Grever and Adriaansen, the “construction of historical knowledge and the various forms of knowledge transmission and acquisition, issues that gave way to history didactics as an academic sub-discipline of historiography” (1) are more than dates and facts; it involves critical inquiry into cause and effect, context, agency, and consequence. Culturally, “changes in ancient Yoruba histories are built on numerous war situations and psychological attachment to human feelings in the process of managing state affairs” (Adeoye and Atteh 354). Ultimately, Ola Rotimi’s historical approach is both a record and a tool: it preserves human heritage and offers insight into recurring patterns, enabling better decision-making. Understanding



history equips individuals to critically engage with their world and contribute to informed citizenship and cultural continuity.

### **Theoretical Premise on Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities**

Benedict Anderson's theory of Imagined Communities provides a compelling theoretical framework for exploring the interplay of language, literature, and proverbial tones on the Yoruba community as portrayed in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. Anderson posits that nations are not natural or inherent entities, but are socially constructed communities that are "imagined" by people who perceive themselves as part of a collective identity. Interestingly, theorists of nationalism are generally perplexed, not to say irritated, by recognising settlements collectively as a group of people through these three paradoxes:

(1) The objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists. (2) The formal universality of nationality as a sociocultural concept - in the modern world everyone can, should, will 'have' a nationality, as he or she 'has' a gender - vs. the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations, such that, by definition, 'Greek' nationality is *sui generis*. (3) The 'political' power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence (Anderson 5).

Central to the imaginations around these paradoxes is language, which functions as a unifying force, allowing individuals within a geographical or cultural boundary to conceptualise shared values, histories, and destinies. Anderson emphasised that the collective

imagination of shared history, identity, and culture invariably defines the essence of unity within a given geopolitical space.

Furthermore, Breuilly identifies key tenets of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities as essential to a nation's developmental process. These are:

#### **i. Culture and Communication:**

Language, literature, drama, and theatre form the basis of communicating a people's cultural heritage. Breuilly for example, expresses that a realistic novel would make the imagined community of contemporaries come alive to the reader, through its depiction of familiar cityscapes and social environments, recognisable but infinitely interchangeable characters, expressions and activities with which the reader could identify, yet at the same time, they were as 'ghostly' imagined and abstract as the tomb of the unknown soldier (5).

Kurunmi, as the eponymous character in Breuilly's context, is tasked with using proverbs to communicate the cultural realities of Yorubaland. At the same time, he becomes the ghostly figure saddled with the responsibility of protecting the Abobaku (one who dies with the king) tradition, and securing the belly of the river Ose as the tomb of the known soldier.

#### **ii. Ritual and Symbols:**

Yorubaland is a traditional society in contemporary times with a



“necessary duality in ritual symbols, combining existential meaning and social integration at once. His notions of the multivocality of symbols and the fusion of cohesion and meaning have been hugely influential in the anthropology of symbols in social life” (7). Ola Rotimi’s concept of *Kurunmi* is used to project how modernity has influenced the essence of the Yoruba people’s way of life.

**iii. Construction of the Past:**

The cultural history of Yorubaland is enriched by myths and stories of legends and heroes past and “just as we have to imagine our consociates for the community to become real and ‘inherently limited’, the creation of a shared past entails hard work and difficult collective decisions, only some of them conscious” (7)

**iv. A Final Word:** According to Breuilly, Anderson’s intellectual personality was nearer to that of anthropology, “the hermeneutic, holistic scholar who looked for those fragile connections that make up our lives, always acutely aware of the necessity for the social order of a symbolic, meaningful foundation” (9)

In *Kurunmi*, Ola Rotimi imaginatively reconstructed the past by recommunicating the culture, rituals, and symbols of the 19th-century Yoruba society. He utilised literature and language to blend English with indigenous Yoruba expressions, idioms, and proverbs.

Additionally, the use of proverbial tones serves not merely as aesthetic devices but as markers of a shared cultural consciousness. They are used to recall communal values, moral codes, and historical events that anchor the Yoruba identity within a broader postcolonial Nigerian framework. However, the “problem of closure as one that affects the individual and interrelationships of cultures and communities, one that has also affected invariably, ‘the problem of the relations between belonging and the breakthrough.’” (Yerima 75). In this sense, the play functions as a literary site where cultural memory is preserved and the Yoruba nation is “imagined” through shared linguistic and historical references. According to (Jegede and Osoba 93), most importantly,

it is found that the proverbs are sensitive to contexts of interaction. Through proverbs, the speakers in the dramas use pragmatic acts, or practs, which counsel, accuse, pronounce, and/or assure. The proverbial propositions are reformulated by the speaker to unveil their meanings, allowing readers, whether or not they are members of the culture, to fully access the dramas.

The use of proverbs in *Kurunmi* reinforces Anderson’s claim that language allows individuals to belong to a community they may never fully see or know, yet deeply understand through collective symbols and stories. Rotimi’s dramatisation of historical conflicts and ideological tensions, communicated through rich proverbial language, becomes a medium through which cultural history is not only remembered but reimagined and relived. Using the performative power of language and proverbs to forge enduring connections



between the past, and the present, the individual's future and that of his community invariably become enriched by the kinds of literature and theatre practices, thereby reenacting past events.

### Synopsis of *Kurunmi*

*Kurunmi* by Ola Rotimi is a historical tragedy that dramatises the conflict between tradition and change in the 19th-century Yoruba society. The play centres on Kurunmi, the fierce and conservative warlord of Ijaye, who opposes the decision to crown a deceased king's son as the successor, contrary to Yoruba custom. Kurunmi's insolence towards modernisation and his constant adherence to tradition set him on a fender-bender situation with other Yoruba leaders and colonial influence. As war ensues, Kurunmi's rigid worldview leads to personal and communal loss. The play explores themes of leadership, cultural integrity, resistance to change, and the tragic consequences of inflexible ideology. Through rich dialogue and historical reflection, *Kurunmi* captures Yoruba identity and political struggle.

### Language, Literature and Proverbial Tones of Cultural History in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*

Ola Rotimi's dramatisation of the clash between tradition and modernity in the literary conception of *Kurunmi* stands out as a compelling example of how language, particularly in its proverbial and rhetorical richness, serves to reconstruct and reimagine the cultural history of a people. Through such rhetorical strategies, Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* becomes a site of cultural dialogue where rich proverbial languages both preserve and question tradition. For man to learn from his surroundings, proverbs that identify

behavioural traits of other living organisms are employed.

**KURUNMI:** The gaboon viper!

When the gaboon viper dies, its children take up its habits, poison and all.

The plantain dies, its saplings take its place, broad leaves and all.

The fire dies, its ashes bear its memory with a shroud of white fluff.

That is the meaning of tradition. (*Kurunmi* 15)

From the first lines of the eponymous character, a description of how generations pass down tradition is captured through the proverb above. Culturally sensitive constructions of language invariably draw the audience into a world where meaning is layered, and understanding deep cultural references becomes essential to reinterpreting the dramatic action. The language used by Ola Rotimi is English, but there is an impactful feeling of code mixing, especially when such proverbs would sound better when said in Yoruba than in English.

Rotimi's use of proverbs is not limited to enhancing dialogue; it also serves an aesthetic and performative function. In performance, proverbs deliver rhythm, musicality, and dramatic cadence to the language of the play. The tonal qualities of Yoruba proverbs—often musical and rhythmically structured—allow for heightened theatrical expression when spoken on stage. For example, Kurunmi;

[Dances as he sings.] When the tortoise is heading for a senseless journey, and you say to him: 'Brother tortoise, brother tortoise, when will you be wise and come back home?' The tortoise will say: 'Brother,





not until I have been disgraced.  
Not until I have been disgraced.  
Not until I have been disgraced.  
Disgraced. Disgraced. Not until I  
have been disgraced. (*Kurunmi*  
17)

Kurunmi sings and dances about the once wise tortoise who chose to head on a senseless journey. Ironically, the song defines Kurunmi's fight against modernity. Adelu is the senseless tortoise in the context of Kurunmi's singing; however, his choice to stand for tradition eventually turns him into the tortoise on the senseless journey. He also referred to Oba Atiba by stating that "does the aged he-goat have to be told that his present long beard is more proof of sexual strength?" (*Kurunmi* 18). It is clearly expressed that Kurunmi, at this point, does not welcome Oba Atiba's wish to change tradition. He decides to use the above to reeducate Timi of Ede and Oluyole about the cultural and traditional essence of the people's practices against Oba Atiba's wish to change tradition.

In Yoruba culture, proverbs are a crucial form of oral literature and are often considered repositories of ancestral wisdom. As part of everyday communication, proverbs reflect moral philosophy, communal beliefs, and historical consciousness.

Timi: The cow defecates and thinks she is soiling the pasture; we shall see whose buttocks get soiled first (*Kurunmi* 21).

This proverb educates readers about Kurunmi's decision to stand for tradition. Kurunmi is the cow who thinks she is soiling the pasture, not knowing she is about to be

shipped to Whiteman's land and she is happy,  
Very happy.

Ehn... let the cow go. When she gets to Whiteman's land, what will she become?

C-o-r-n-e-d b-e-e-f! (*Kurunmi* 22).

The illusion of a man who thinks he is about to become something great is portrayed in Kurunmi's lines; however, Timi captures a man about to be sacrificed and let down. Rotimi's employment of proverbs in *Kurunmi* therefore serves to situate the play within an authentically African aesthetics, resisting Western dramaturgical conventions while foregrounding indigenous epistemologies.

Proverbial expressions in *Kurunmi* also serve as an important device for character development. Kurunmi, as a leader steeped in tradition, speaks almost entirely in proverbs and high rhetorical language, portraying him as a custodian of cultural values. For instance, he expressed himself by stating that the "bull frog that rivals the size of the elephant will burst" (*Kurunmi* 29). The proverb points out that no matter how frog inflates itself it cannot be compared to an elephant. In this sense, Adelu is the frog while Kurunmi is the elephant.

Kurunmi: A goat gets wiser when an ear is cropped off...

The frog is kicked - kpa  
it flattens y-a-a-k-a-t-a!

On its back. Ehn...

We shall all die 'gbere'

We shall all die 'gbe...' (*Kurunmi* 32).

The proverb above talks about fighting for what is right even in the presence of the inevitability of death. Kurunmi chose to protect tradition rather than succumb to the wind of social dynamics.

Similarly, the dialogic structure of *Kurunmi* often sets characters against each other in ideological or moral debate,



and proverbs frequently serve as persuasive tools in such exchanges.

The young palm trees grows tall rapidly, and it is proud,

thinking, hoping that one day it will scratch the face of the sky

[Chuckles] Have its elders before it touch the sky?" (*Kurunmi* 35-36).

Kurunmi uses the above to point out how ambitious Rev Mann is, as well as his not thinking about his predecessor's achievements and benchmarks. It was also reemphasised by Kurunmi when he said, "An Elder sees a mudskipper, he must not afterwards say it was a crocodile" (*Kurunmi* 42). Kurunmi expressed that a leader must stay true to their words, even when things are getting rough and going against the plan. When a leader comes to these realities, he understands that he must face the veracities, although he "paddle here, a paddle there, but the canoe stays still" (*Kurunmi* 87), premeditates on his helplessness and futility. Kurunmi's leadership role protected tradition against modernity by employing high rhetorical language, portraying him as the custodian of the people's ancient cultural values.

This language choice not only enhances the play's dramatic appeal but also situates it firmly within the framework of cultural nationalism—a call for the reinvigoration of African identity through the arts.

A man with grass on his buttocks must not forget himself when he goes to put out a neighbour's fire" (*Kurunmi* 74).

From Somoye's point of view, Egba warriors have arrived in Ijaiye to help in the war against Ibadan. He impresses on Kurunmi the need for urgency in executing the war by expressing that the Egba is like a man with grass on his buttocks because the need to also hastily return home to protect their space,

which the people of Dahomey have threatened to take over, remains the priority. The tone of the proverb is persuasive and implies that those susceptible to danger must always be wary. The proverb serves a communicative purpose of teaching wisdom and watchfulness even in helping others.

Rotimi's careful integration of proverbs into the dialogue of his characters not only enriches the play's literary quality but also grounds it in the oral traditions of Yoruba storytelling, ultimately highlighting the importance of language in preserving and transmitting cultural history.

WARRIORS [in inspired unison]:  
The hawk!

The hawk yearns for the taste of the snail.

But it forgets; it forgets that the shell of the snail is no food for hawks.

The hawk will fail. Muso!  
Muso! Muso! (*Kurunmi* 89)

In this proverbial context, Ijaiye warriors see themselves as a delicacy for the Ibadan warriors, who do not consider them obstacles that could stop them from suppressing Ijaiye. And at the same time, there is the belief that Ijaiye can still overcome Ibadan because Ijaiye do not see themselves as consumable to Ibadan warriors.

Interestingly, this is practically why Somoye insisted that the owl only "leave it nest at noon, danger is near" (*Kurunmi* 92). Somoye's perspective is captured in this proverb to represent the unfortunate position Kurunmi had found himself. Kurunmi is that leader who has led his people to disaster, and what remains of his "present life is but a shadow of his proud past, then it is time to be a leader no more" (*Kurunmi* 93). The loss of his five sons sent him to a point of no return. Kurunmi requests



that his body be buried at the belly of the river Ose, where his honour was drowned then, he commits suicide. Ola Rotimi's performative picturisation of cultural elements enhances the immersive quality of Nigeria's cultural history, and this invariably allows it to function both as a historical narrative and as a living cultural artefact.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* effectively intertwines language, literature, and proverbial tones of cultural history to create a profound narrative that both preserves and critiques Yoruba traditions. Through the rich use of proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and indigenous linguistic forms, Rotimi underscores the central role of language in shaping identity, historical consciousness, and social values. The play not only dramatises the complexities of Yoruba cultural history but also uses language as a vehicle for ideological resistance and a reflection on the tension between tradition and modernity.

Thus, *Kurunmi* demonstrates a significant beautification of language and proverbs through African theatre expressions as tools for cultural preservation and transformation. This study therefore, This study therefore recommends that future studies probe deeper into the relationship between language and identity in postcolonial African drama, exploring how contemporary playwrights continue to engage with indigenous linguistic forms. Additionally, scholars and practitioners should explore the performative potential of proverbs in modern theatrical productions, ensuring that these rich cultural elements remain central to African dramatic expressions and continue to shape the discourse on African identity and history.

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